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ABSTRACT

To study gifted adolescents and their perception of education, social relationships, career counseling, and self-image, interviews were conducted with 60 grade twelve students identified as gifted in four secondary schools in Ontario (Canada), and with 12 of their teachers/guidance counselors. Information from the Offer Self-Image Questionnaire for Adolescents provided similarities and differences, which were compared to the descriptions from group and personal interviews. An ethnographic design reduced the descriptive data to essential essences. The results compare sex differences and demonstrate the intellectual, emotional, social and behavioral adaptations perceived by gifted adolescents in their environment. Four hypotheses were advanced: (1) gifted adolescent females respond to learning experiences differently from gifted males; (2) social interactions influence gifted females and gifted males to a similar degree; (3) gifted adolescent females aspire to careers from a different perspective than do gifted adolescent males; and (4) gifted adolescent females differ from gifted adolescent males with respect to identity in the psychological and social dimensions. A four-page bibliography concludes the document. (CL)

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Sex Differences Influencing Gifted Adolescents: An Ethnographic Study

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Sex Differences Influencing Gifted Adolescents

ABSTRACT

This paper is a study of gifted adolescents and their perception of education, social relationships, career counseling and self-image. Data consists of interviews with sixty grade twelve students identified as gifted in four secondary schools in Ontario, and interviews with twelve of their teachers/guidance counselors. Information from the Offer Self-Image Questionnaire provided similarities and differences, which were compared to the descriptions from group and personal interviews. An ethnographic design reduced the descriptive data to essential essences. The results compare sex differences and demonstrate the intellectual, emotional, social and behavioural adaptations perceived by gifted adolescents in their environment. Recommendations for educators and policy makers are included.

Sex Differences Influencing Gifted Adolescents: An Ethnographic Study

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Studies of gifted children are generally concentrated where programs are available, in elementary and junior grades. Research into the complex needs of gifted and talented adolescents in secondary schools is less extensive than that of young gifted children or normative adolescents.

Prior to adolescence, sexual-typing of social roles influences emotional traits and behaviour patterns, causing gifted adolescents to react in different ways. Sex differences reach across all aspects of our educational experiences. Given that different social and emotional developments characterize females and males, how does the female gifted adolescent cope with factors such as self-esteem, social relationships, achievement and career aspirations in secondary school as compared to the male gifted adolescent?

The purpose of this research was to investigate the differences between gifted female and male adolescents in how they subjectively experience their educational environment and how they respond to it.

The objectives of the paper are three: (1) to provide descriptive insights into the intellectual emotional, social and behavioural differences between gifted adolescents in secondary school; (2) to compare this study with the previous literature on adolescents and gifted young people; (3) to recommend strategies for differentiating education for gifted adolescent females and males in secondary schools.

Perspectives and Theoretical Framework

The research is directly concerned with sex differences between gifted adolescents. Two basic assumptions are made: (1) that gender differences reach across all aspects of emotional experiences causing adolescents to react in different ways; (2) that gifted young people apply keener abilities, more critical judgements and intense commitment when interacting with their world (Renzulli, 1977). Maccoby and Jacklin's (1974) early work on sex differences supports the first assumption. Much of the research in gifted children supports the second (Ward, 1961; Gowan, Khatena and Torrance, 1979). These assumptions strongly suggest that a productive way to understand gifted adolescents' meaning of their world and the influences which guide their behaviours within it, is to study the adolescents themselves.

The theoretical framework for the research is derived from the study of both adolescence and education of gifted students. Douvan and Adelson (1966) argue that adolescence is a complex time, a time of crises (Erikson, 1968). Adding the factors of giftedness and sex differences bring additional issues into play. Gifted females and gifted males are influenced by previously learned sex-role expectations. (Bardwick, 1971; Barwich and Barnett, 1979; Offer et al, 1982). Behavioural theorists such as Erikson (1950), Blos (1967), and Gilligan (1982) argue that gender differences are evident in levels of autonomy and affiliation. In addition, gifted young people bring different social and emotional characteristics to their educational environment (Barbe and Renzulli, 1975; Colangelo and Zaffran, 1979). Gifted females, in aspiring to

careers and lifestyle preferences, are less comfortable with traditional stereotyped career choices than normative female adolescents (Birnbaum, 1975), but guidance and counselling practices in secondary schools may not adequately attend to this development. Gifted males, while recognizing a sense of personal androgyny, are uncomfortable in demonstrating characteristics considered as sex-inappropriate by social standards (Gowan, 1972; Mackinnon, 1978). Educators, lacking understanding of the conflicts associated with being a gifted adolescent, may not perceive the discomfort os such students (Passow, 1979). Any discomfort at the gap between what they perceive to be ideal and what they actually observe in personal and social behaviours, can result in anxiety and limited development for a gifted adolescent.

Studies examining affective behaviors report that gifted adolescents display independent and self-evaluative behavior (Maslow, 1970; Perrone, Kashner and Male, 1979; Kohlberg, 1979), awareness of a future perspective (Shakeshaft and Palmieri, 1978; WIlson, 1982), commitment to action and society (Hoyt and Habeler, 1974; Tysse, 1982) and sensitivity to role models (Baruch, 1976; Callahan, 1979). By listening to the decriptions of gifted adolescents themselves, research can more fully determine the extent sex differneces may play in their personal and educational millieu.

Kohlberg (1976) notes that a child's perception of sexual identity changes with intellectual growth. Biological factors may be implicated in sex differences in aggression as well as visual-spatial ability (Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974; Benbow and Stanley, 1980). Genetic factors

and parent-modeling affect sex differences (Baumrind, 1971; Baruch, 1974). Socializing agents in the culture affect sex differences (Kagan, 1964; Heilbrun, 1968; Broverman et al., 1972; Horner, 1972; Morgan and Farber, 1982). Students are influenced by what teachers think of them (Fennema and Sherman, 1977). There is also evidence that teachers expect sex-related differences in achievement (Fennema and Sherman, 1978; Leinhardt et al., 1979).

Research shows that sex-role stereotyping influences the relationships with peers and teachers that gifted females have in secondary school (Morse and Bruch, 1970; Torrance, 1972; Perrone et al., 1979). It also has an effect on the career aspirations of gifted adolescents (Kurtzman, 1963; Rodenstein, Pfleger and Colangelo, 1977; Fitzgerald and Crites, 1980; Delisle, 1982). Surrounded by cultural expectations, what actual coping strategies are used by gifted adolescents in their search for identity? Human interaction always takes place in a social-historical context. In order to gain better descriptions and increased understanding of human meaning-making (Kegan, 1982), we must allow humans to reflect on the desires of what they do and what they hope to achieve. Educational inquiry that is ethnographic seeks to interpret, understand, participate in and assess learners within the social reality of their own environment.

Key Research Areas

Discovery of personal perceptions and interrelationships requires personal observation. In order to get a basic picture of what is occurring, while at the same time focus on some general factors, the following KEY RESEARCH AREAS formed a framework for interviews of students and teachers. From the framework, research questions were planned and expanded, thus allowing the researcher more latitude to identify events, behaviors, patterns and themes among the sample groups. Basic generalizations will then evolve from the inferences suggested in the discover process.

KEY RESEARCH AREAS

1. Gifted adolescent females experience learning differently from gifted adolescent males in secondary school.

2. There are differences in the degree of influence of social interactions between gifted adolescent females and males in secondary school.

3. There are differences in the career aspirations of gifted adolescent females and males in secondary school.

4. There are differences in the self-image of gifted adolescent females and males in secondary school.

Methods and Techniques

The research reported is qualitative with some quantitative data from the Offer Self-Image Questionnaire for Adolescents (OSIQ) (1982). An ethnographic approach was used to describe the similarities, differences and themes which emerged from the research data. Group and private interviews were conducted with adolescents who had been screened and identified as gifted according to Ontario Ministry of Education policies. Interviews were held with school counsellors and teachers responsible for home-room or core subjects with the gifted students. Patterns, themes, similiarities and differences which emerged from the OSIQ provided insights for questions in the group interviews. Interviews were semi-structured to allow for emerging personal insights. Compatible with the goals of naturalistic inquiry (Guba, 1978), situation variables were not manipulated but reported as they occurred within the field test setting of each of four secondary schools. All interviews were conducted by the researcher herself, tape recorded and transcribed ad liberatim.

Questionnaire data (OSIQ) were compared with interview data, statements made in group interviews were compared with those made in private interviews, and the group data set of emerging themes was compared with the individual data patterns to discover general relationships within the context of study. All subjects in private interviews read their own case studies to assure accuracy of fact and interpretation. No names were used so that anonymity was preserved. A panel of Ontario educators validated the findings.

The data were analyzed in a three-part reduction process: (1) discovering factors which relate to the subjective and objective perceptions of respondents; (2) reducing the data to congruent themes; (3) discovering the essences of subject's perceptions through further reduction. Hypotheses emerged in the four key research areas: (1) education; (2) social relationships; (3) career aspirations; and (4) self-image.

Approaching gifted adolescents with a goal of trying to understand their point of view, while not free of limitations, can distort their experiences the least. As argued by Bogdan and Bicklen (1982) and Patton (1980), the researcher accepted what a subject described as valid, focusing on the individual's own way of interpreting significance within his/her environment. The research is generalizable mainly to the subjects in the study, but certain factors help widen educators' general knowledge of gifted adolescent females and males.

Implementing the Research Design

Four secondary schools responded to the research proposal. Sixty students from Grade 12 were identified according to their achievement on the Honour roll, consistent performance in course work over three years in secondary school leadership abilities, special talents in one or more areas, and by nominations from two or more teachers in each school. Discussion among the Principal and/or Vice-Principal, Guidance personnel and the researcher helped to keep selection procedures as uniform as possible in each school site.

Respondents ranged from 16 to 18. Parental permission was sought and granted from those whose children were under 18 years of age. Sixty students formed the sample group, thirty males and thirty females. Because the city has an open-boundary approach for education, students in any one achool might not necessarily live in the same geographic locale as the school site. Thus, little difference can be ascribed to location of school and socio-economic setting of the immediate area. Parents of the students held a wide variety of jobs, from working in the automobile industry to teaching at the city's university. Slightly more than half of the parents both worked ouside of the home, but it was interesting to note that 45% of the mothers were full-time homemakers. There were few single parent families among the respondents.

The secondary schools were located in different sections of the city. An introductory meeting was held with all sixty students identified in each school. The Superintendent of Special Services introduced the researcher and explained the Board's support for the study. The researcher gave an overview of the purposes of the research and the expected commitment of the respondents. The students under eighteen years of age were asked to return a signed parental consent form prior to beginning the study. Student questions were answered and the researcher attempted to establish an atmosphere for open-ended exchange and trust.

Quantitative Data Collecting

During a forty-minute period in each individual school, the total group wrote the Offer Self-Image Questionnaire (OSIQ). This instrument, tested in four countries with over 10,000 adolescents ages thirteen to nineteen, is a self-descriptive personality test that measures the following areas:

(1) Psychological Self
   (a) Impulse control
   (b) Emotional tone
   (c) Body and self-image
(2) Social Self
   (a) Social relationships
   (b) Morals
   (c) Vocational and educational goals
(3) Familial Self
   (a) Family relationships
(4) Coping Self
   (a) Mastery of the external world
   (b) Psycopathology
   (c) Superior adjustment
(5) Idealism

The Psychological Self scales measure the adolescent's concerns, wishes, fantasies, control of impulses, stability of feelings and the self-concept of body boundaries and development. The Social Self scales measure the adolescent's perceptions of interpersonal relationships,

friendship patterns, sense of duty and concern for others, and degree of planning for a future vocation. The Familial Self scale measures the adolescent's attitudes and feelings about relationships and emotional atmosphere in the home. The Coping Self scale measures the adolescent's adaptation to the environment, and the degree of emotional stability and ego strength with which he/she deals with the environment. The newest addition is the Idealism scale which includes experimental items to determine the adolescent's concern for the world and his/her responsibility within society. There is another scale, within the instrument, the Sexual Self, but the research committee of the Windsor School board did not feel comfortable with a number of the items, so it was decided to eliminate the entire sub-section from the research study. The items were deleted in the test booklets and scoring sheets the respondents used.

There were two instruments, one for males and one for females. Questions are similar on both, only pronouns or nouns are changed where necessary to correspond with the gender of the test taker. Questions are written both positively and negatively and scrambled throughout the paper to help ensure correct reading. Subjects were asked to respond to each statement in terms of their own feelings. Respondents proceeded at their own pace while answering. Responses were on a scale of one to six. Completed answer sheets were checked by the researcher to ensure that every test item had been answered.

The OSIQ shows moderate to high correlations between itself and the Bell Inventory, the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI)

and the Tenessee Self-Image Test. For more detailed description of the OSIQ and its application in a variety of adolescent behaviours among deviant groups, the reader may be interested in reading The Adolescent: A Psychological Self-Portrait (Offer et al, 1981).

Qualitative Data Collecting

Using the OSIQ as a statistical base for patterns, similarities and differences, interviews were conducted within the field setting of each of the four secondary schools. Compatible with the goals of naturalistic study (Guba, 1978), situational variables were not manipulated but reported directly as they occurred within each setting. Group interview with male subjects were held in each school. The semi-structured interviews were approximately an hour in length. Questions were based on the themes and insights which emerged from the general analysis of the OSIQ data. Groups ranged in size from six to ten respondents totalling thirty females and thirty males. The sessions provided a secondary source of information to cross validate the original analysis from the questionnaire. All interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed ad liberatim. From the lists of respondents, three names were selected at random from each of the two groups in the schools. Personal interviews of approximately an hour's length were held with three females and three males in each school. The research questions, which formed the main focus of the interviews, had been previously field-tested in several secondary schools in the Niagara region of Ontario.

The order of the questions was not followed rigidly. The sequence of the discussion was often dictated by the flow of conversation. In general, the questions focused on the key areas, but if additional questions seemed fuitful, they were explored and an unstructured approach was maintained to help the subjects feel comfortable explaining their own attitudes and feelings.

In addition to the student interviews, personal interviews were conducted in each school with two of the teaching staff: one guidance counsellor, and one teacher involved with the subjects in a core content area, i.e., Math, Science, Languages. Teacher subjects, who were familiar with the gifted students, were recommended by the school administrators. The interviews were approximately an hour in length, tape recorded and transcribed as in the other sessions. Over 10,000 lines of speech were transcribed from the forty interviews. By adapting the research questions to suit the perceptions and observations of the teachers, consistency of information was ensured. Subjects involved in private interviews were later asked to read their own typed case studies and comment on the accuracy of fact.

From the three data cources, OSIQ, student interviews and teacher interviews, a triangulation process of analysis was undertaken (Patton, 1980). Questionnaire data was compared with interview data. Statements made in public, group interviews were compared with private interviews. Individuals' perspectives were compared with other's points of view re: the questions discussed. General patterns and relationships began to emerge that seemed common to the sample population. Descriptive insights which emerged resulted in the following conclusions.

Conclusions

Given the descriptive data from interviews and questionnaires of sixty gifted adolescents and twelve secondary school educators, the following conclusions emerged.

SIMILARITIES

The gifted adolescents were similar in that:

1. they seek educational challenge;
2. they prefer to learn through discussion, alone, or in small groups with similar-interest peer;
3. they seek more flexibility, variety and depth in learning experiences;
4. they have learned to "under-achieve" at a level which provides acceptable grades without exerting a great deal of effort;
5. they cooperate and participate in a wide range of school and extra-curricular activities;
6. they have multipotential ability across most school disciplines;
7. they recognize constraints of teacher's responsibilities in the classroom, but perceive school has not achieved its stated cognitive and affective goals in terms of their personal development;
8. they perceive teachers have little or no influence on their decisions;
9. they respect parents beliefs and value their supportive family life;
10. they perceive mother is more influential in their lives than father;
11. they have close friends of both genders who have similar interests and/or abilities;
12. they are anxious about their abilities to attract social acceptance;
13. they perceive sex-role stereotyping among certain teachers;
14. they perceive internal pressures to succeed are stronger than external perssures to conform;

15. they seek lifelong careers that allow creativity and self-expression;

16. they plan career directions independent of school guidance personnel;

17. they seek improved counselling and guidance support services to start at the intermediate level;

18. they are willing to delay gratification of intense relationships in order to achieve career goals;

19. they describe their self-image as healthy in terms of the psychological, familial and coping constructs of self-identity.

DIFFERENCES

The gifted adolescent females and males were different in that:

1. females often choose to work in groups of similar ability; males prefer to work independently or in competition;

2. females are more academic oriented; males are more general, all-round students;

3. females perceive males are more successful in Mathematics and Science; males perceive females are more capable in English and Literature;

4. females moderate behaviours in class due to external influences; males take fewer risks among social interactions and in new situations;

5. females over-extend their work activities; males believe they have a balance of varying activities in their lives;

6. females select specific career fields earlier than males;

7. females decide careers with a view to service to others; males select career fields with a view to long-term statibility and room for autonomy;

8. females see possibility of remaining single in the interest of career fulfillment; males see themselves as married in the future;

9. females see short-term interruption to career for child-bearing; males see compromises as shared acitivity in marriage as long as male career security is not at risk;

10. females seek access to female teachers and female guidance cousellors; males seek increased access to testing services for career decision-making;

11. females see themselves as leaders in present circumstances and in the future; males see themselves more conforming in social settings;

12. females feel more anxiety over impulse control and familial relationships; males feel more anxiety over personal appearance, social interactions and ability to adapt to external expectations; (see TABLE I)

13. females feel acceptance when displaying sex inappropriate behaviours in public; males overtly display behaviours sex-stereotyped as appropriate for males, but in private among similar ability friends they are confortable being androgynous.

Recognizing that qualitative research deals with individual descriptions and insights, identifiable themes emerged from the study. Relationships seemed to appear that suggested common sociological influences affecting gifted adolescents. It was difficult to separate the numerous educational, social, and emotional factores which influenced the development of the gifted adolescents. However, by looking at the individual insights and identifying general themes, the foregoing conclusions suggested four hypotheses.

The hypotheses which emerged were:

Hypothesis I

Gifted adolescent females respond to learning experiences differently from gifted males.

Hypothesis II

Social interactions influence gifted females and gifted males to a similar degree.

Hypothesis III

Gifted adolescent females aspire to careers from a different perspective than do gifted adolescent males.

Hypothesis IV

Gifted adolescent females differ from gifted adolescents males with respect to identity in the psychological and social dimensions.

SUMMARY

In summary, there was evidence to indicate that in this study, gifted females responded more to adult expectations and behaviours while gifted males responded more to peer expectation and behaviours. Changes in society may be affecting traditional sex-role attitudes, but gender affects all aspects of an individual's responses to society. From the descriptions of the gifted adolescents whose varying racial, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds presented an cosmopolitan cross-section of an industrial city, gender differences were apparent.

During adolescence society begins to insist that individuals take on sex-appropriate roles and behaviours. The fulfillment of sex-role expectations can become an important reinforcement or punishment from external sources. Adolescents recall and act upon previously learned sex-appropriate behaviours as well as learn new ones. The gifted adolescents in this study, with their keen ability and heightened sensitivity, have become attentive to societal pressures. They described differing and similar ways in which socialization processes influenced development of their sense of identity. There are strong implications for future comparative studies between gifted adolescents in regular classes and gifted adolescents in special programs organized to meet

their unique educational needs. Gifted adolescents in programs for the gifted may provide research data which differ form gifted adolescents who are not in such programs. It is imperative that future descriptive research be continued in order to determine the potential impact of fluctuating social attitudes on gifted adolescent females and males.

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